

OLIVACEOUS CORMORANT

BY EUGENE EISENMANN

THE Olivaceous Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax olivaceus*) has one of the most remarkable distributions of neotropical birds. It not only ranges throughout tropical America but breeds north to southern Texas, Louisiana, and the Bahamas and south to the sub-Antarctic coast of Cape Horn. It nests in great colonies on coastal islands drenched by salt spray, but is equally common on large rivers and fresh-water lakes. Isolated pairs or small groups can be found on lesser wooded streams and ponds. Abundant at sea-level in the warm waters of the torrid zone, it yet manages to survive on cold lakes high in the Andes. Goodall, Johnson, and Philippi (1951. "Las Aves de Chile," 2:82) report their amazement at finding ten of these cormorants on Lake Cotacotani, east of Arica, Chile, at an elevation of 4,800 meters—almost 14,500 feet.

In appearance and behavior this cormorant much resembles the familiar North American *Phalacrocorax auritus* and *P. carbo*. Distinctly smaller than either, adults of *P. olivaceus* look solidly black in the field, and immatures dull brownish, paling to whitish on the breast in juveniles. In breeding dress, at close range, one can see fine, white, filament-like feathers on the sides of the head and neck, a white line bordering the gular pouch, and the olive-slate centers of the feathers on the upper back and wing-coverts.

My own experience with this species has been chiefly in Panamá. There the nominate race is common wherever sufficient water exists, inland as well as along both coasts. I have seen pairs along small, shallow rivers and lakes, usually perched on trees, not only in the lowlands, but also at altitudes of over 4,000 feet. On Gatun Lake, a large artificial lake created in the building of the Canal, this cormorant is the only swimming bird regularly observed. Here one finds the cormorants drying their feathers while perched on projecting branches of the drowned forest or slipping through the water, largely submerged, with only serpentine head and neck showing. Lines of cormorants can often be noted flying high across the continent from ocean to ocean. At low tide, great flocks, moving in unison, fish where the waves break across the exposed rocks and flats at Panama city. Individuals perch on the spars of fishing vessels or on the sea-wall, unconcerned by the presence of human beings. In the Gulf of Panama these birds are especially abundant, breeding on many islets. By preference nests are built in trees, but on islands where trees are absent low bushes are accepted, and, if need be, the

bare rock or ground. (See R. C. Murphy, 1936. "Oceanic Birds of South America," 2:909-915.)

Several subspecies have been recognized, but the differences are slight, chiefly size and relative proportions. Oddly enough, the nominate race, which extends widely over the tropics, averages larger than the races described from the presumably cooler extremities of the range, both north (*mexicanus* and *chancho*) and south (*hornensis*). The species name *P. olivaceus* used in the A.O.U. Check-List, should be replaced, according to Hellmayr and Conover (1948. *Field Mus. Nat. Hist., Zool. Series*, 13, Pt. 1, No. 2:141), by *P. brasilianus*.

The A.O.U. Check-List Committee, translating the current technical designation, has adopted Olivaceous Cormorant as the English name for the species as a whole. While superior to the unduly restrictive geographic names, such as Mexican and Brazilian Cormorant, that have been used, this selection is hardly felicitous for a bird that is essentially all black. My personal preference would be Neotropic Cormorant, as the species extends over the entire Neotropical Region and is the only cormorant that does so.

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